

Does adding extra padding make football helmets safer? Experts split

By Chicago Tribune, adapted by Newsela staff on 09.11.13

Word Count **682**



The Wesleyan School football team in Norcross, Ga., at practice wearing Guardian helmet caps to minimize the impact of head collisions on the field. Photo: Caitlin Hanson, Guardian Caps

CHICAGO — The National Football League on Sept. 5 settled a lawsuit accusing it of not doing enough to prevent brain injuries. But there is still much confusion over those injuries, known as [concussions](https://www.newsela.com/?tag=concussions) (<https://www.newsela.com/?tag=concussions>). The Guardian is just one example.

The Guardian is a padded cap that is strapped around the outside of a football helmet. Its aim is to lower the force of collisions when players crash into one another. The product has been available for two years. It doesn't promise to prevent concussions. Nonetheless, Elmhurst College players who wear the cap during practice say it has made a big difference.

"It gets rid of those little small hits you get in practice," said player Nick Spracklen, 20. "It keeps your head fresh, keeps those headaches away. You leave practice without a headache, your whole day is better."

But as football season begins, safety questions remain. Scientists, companies and lawyers continue to argue over the best way to protect players from head injuries.

Concussions Hard To Predict

Much of the arguing is now focused on the helmet. The former players who settled with the NFL are still suing Riddell, maker of the league's official helmet. They claim the company sold an unsafe product.

Into this storm have stepped a few small companies that sell add-on helmet pads, which they say are a way to increase protection. So far experts are split: Some believe that extra padding makes sense. Others say stricter testing is needed.

For years, the way football helmets were tested was pretty straightforward. Companies strap one to a dummy head fitted with sensors. Then, they slam it into a post at different speeds. If the tests show a fractured skull would be unlikely, the helmet passes.

Such tests are good at showing a helmet's power to prevent major damage to the head. What they don't say much about is the likelihood of getting a concussion. No one has figured out how to predict that. This is because of the injury's complexity.

And it also is due to individual differences that influence whether someone ends up with a concussion. These range from a person's genetics to whether they have had previous blows to the head.

Reducing A Hit By 33 Percent

The uncertainty has created an opportunity for companies that say they have found new ways to give athletes better protection.

The Guardian is made by Georgia-based POC Ventures. Its inventor, Lee Hanson, claims it reduces the force of a hit by 33 percent.

Hanson is careful to say that the Guardian can't prevent concussions. But, he said, "common sense" strongly suggests that more padding will help players.

Rob Vito is taking a different approach. His company, Unequal Technologies, sells pads that are attached inside a helmet. They strengthen a helmet's inner cushioning, which he mockingly calls "couch foam."

John Thorne is coach of the football team at North Central College in Naperville. Some of his players started using the Unequal pads this year. However, it's still too soon to tell how well they work.

"I've been coaching football for 45 years, and I'm always looking for a way to make the game safer," he said. "We're hoping this is a good technology. It seems to make some sense."

Unknown How Much Pads Help

Biomedical engineer Steven Rowson helped develop a safety rating system for football helmets. According to him, the idea behind the new products does indeed make sense.

"Adding padding is going to reduce acceleration to the head," he said. "When you reduce acceleration to the head, you're going to reduce the risk of concussion."

But it still not really known just how much the pads can help.

Hanson said several hundred teams use the Guardian, and he was confident most will want to continue. Elmhurst College is one of them.

Coach Joe Adam plans to keep Guardians on his players' helmets. He said the shells have proven their worth.

"I can just go by results," he said. "In 21 practices, we've had one concussion. I would think that's on the lower side for teams in our area."

Quiz

- 1 Select the paragraph from the section, "Concussions Hard To Predict" that contains an idiom that describes people with different opinions who cannot agree on a decision.

- 2 Read the sentence from the article.

"It gets rid of those little small hits you get in practice," said player Nick Spracklen, 20. "It keeps your head fresh, keeps those headaches away. You leave practice without a headache, your whole day is better."

What does the word 'fresh' mean as in the paragraph above?

- (A) clear
- (B) cool
- (C) repaired
- (D) undamaged

- 3 Read the sentence from the article.

And it also is due to individual differences that influence whether someone ends up with a concussion.

What is a synonym for the word 'influence' as in the sentence above?

- (A) lead to
- (B) draw from
- (C) contribute to
- (D) align with

4 Read the sentence from the article.

They strengthen a helmet's inner cushioning, which he mockingly calls "couch foam."

When someone says something 'mockingly,' they say it:

- (A) with disrespect
- (B) with anger
- (C) with tenderness
- (D) with seriousness

Answer Key

- 1 Select the paragraph from the section, "Concussions Hard To Predict" that contains an idiom that describes people with different opinions who cannot agree on a decision.

Paragraph 5:

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